



Marilyn Frye

**THE CAGE OF WOMEN'S
OPPRESSION**

**OPPRESSION & JUSTICE (FALL 2013)
LAURA GUIDRY-GRIMES**



TOWARD A USEFULLY NARROW CONCEPTION OF OPPRESSION

- ▶ Do not want ‘oppression’ to cover all types of limitation or harm
 - ▶ Want to be able to distinguish types of moral harm, what makes some systems/institutions/practices morally problematic, and types of morally appropriate responses
 - ▶ Distinctive vulnerabilities as part of being identified with oppressed group
 - ▶ **Double-bind:** “situations in which options are reduced to a very few and all of them expose one to penalty, censure or deprivation” (2) – *characteristic of oppression*
 - ▶ Encourages acquiescence, contributions to own oppression
 - ▶ Frye mentions the following examples: being heterosexually active/inactive, being a mother/not, marrying/not. Can you think of other examples of double-binds for women?
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CAGE METAPHOR

- ▶ “The experience of oppressed people is that the living of one’s life is confined and shaped by forces and barriers which are not accidental or occasional and hence avoidable, but are systematically related to each other in such a way as to catch one between and among them and restrict or penalize motion in any direction” (4)
 - ▶ Look macroscopically, instead of myopically, at barriers in place
 - ▶ **Move from single wire → caged system**
 - ▶ ...otherwise inclined toward victim-blaming, obliviousness, bystander mode...
 - ▶ **What is compelling about this metaphor? How might it be imperfect?**
 - ▶ **What does this cage mean for freedom, mobility, and agency?**
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WHO IS CAGED?

- ▶ Individuals within social groups who are constrained and immobilized in virtue of their group membership
- ▶ Sometimes obvious, sometimes not...
 - ▶ **What unites women? – serving the needs and interests of the dominant class (men) as men define those needs**
 - ▶ **Personal service – sexual service – ego service**
 - ▶ **Enriches the dominant class (even when unbeknownst to particular men) and hurts the oppressed class (as a whole or individually)**
 - ▶ **“fatal combination of responsibility and powerlessness” (9)**



PROGRESSES IN MOBILITY...



Minimal
options



More options
and rights

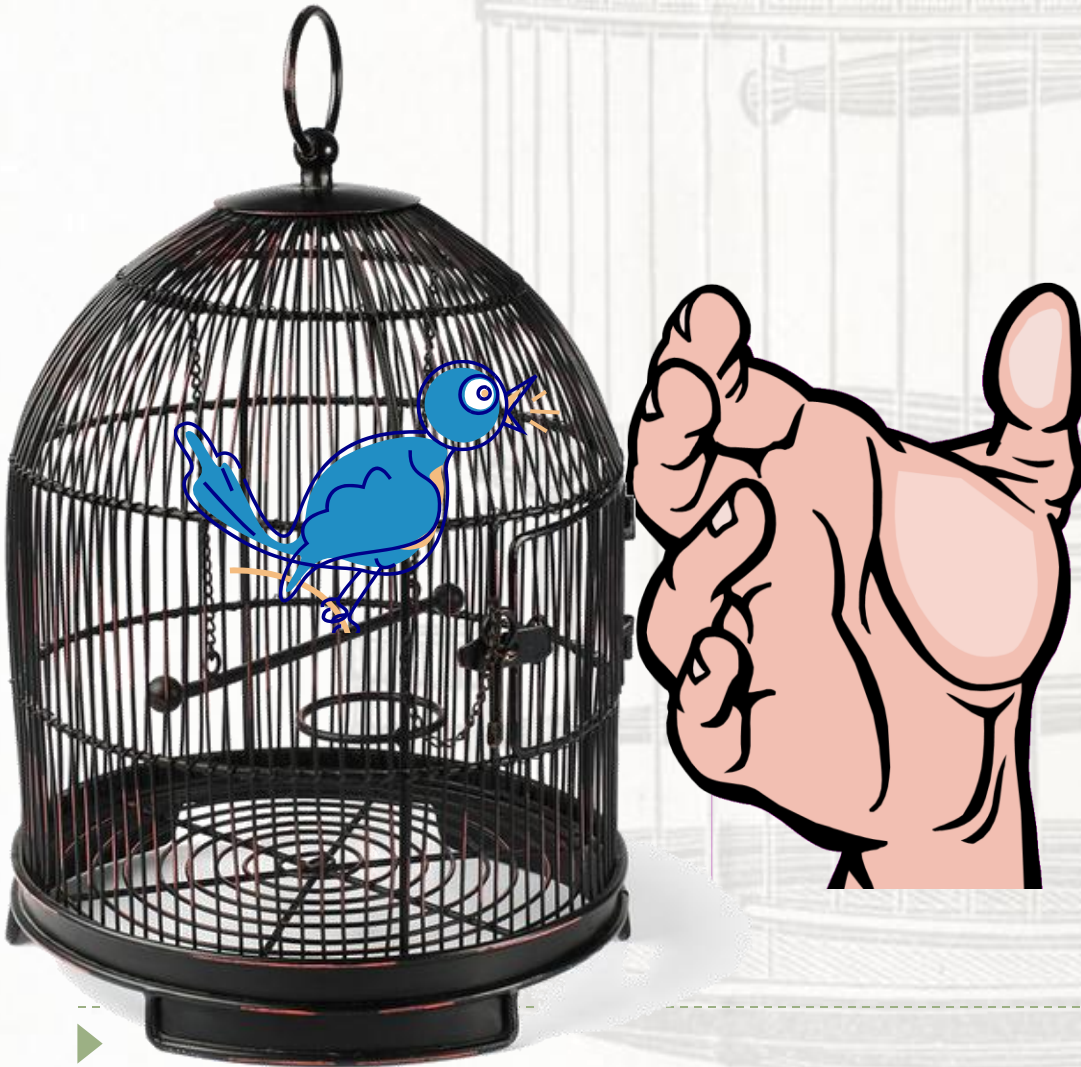


Even more options
and rights

▶ Notice the cage persists...

GLIMPSES OF AGENTIAL FREEDOM...

For a woman whose circumstances afford her opportunities to break free (in some respects), there remains the ever-present threat of being subordinated, humiliated, and overridden in virtue of being a woman.



EVERYDAY MESSAGES

- ▶ E.g., many forms of gallantry and politeness reinforce women's incompetence, fragility
 - ▶ **Do you agree with Frye's analysis of door-opening? What about her discussion of men showing emotion by crying?**
- ▶ Trivial needs constructed for women (e.g., having a door opened, obsessive beauty norms) based on what serves the patriarchal system
 - ▶ **What is morally problematic about these needs being built up and reinforced? How do they serve asymmetric power relations?**



FRYE'S TEST QUESTIONS

- ▶ **Are social structures oppressive?**
 - ▶ What is the context of those structures?
 - ▶ How do those barriers fit within other barriers?
 - ▶ Who imposes the penalties for improper relaxation of the barriers?
 - ▶ What are the perceptions of groups on both sides of the barriers?
 - ▶ What interests are served by the maintenance of those confining structures?
 - ▶ Do the structures enable autonomy or reduce and immobilize?
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GROUP WORK!

▶ Additional terms to be of use:

▶ **Exploitation**

- ▶ **Taking unfair advantage of someone's vulnerability and benefitting as a result** (Little & Carse)

▶ **Coercion**

- ▶ **Encouraging or discouraging someone from doing something on threat of some sort of penalty; when someone chooses x to avoid negative consequences/punishment that attends other options, though otherwise she would do x** (Nozick)

▶ **Patriarchal bargain**

- ▶ **When women strategize within patriarchal constraints for the sake of reaping some benefit (e.g., getting ahead or surviving)** (Kandiyoti; Lorber)
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QUESTIONS? COMMENTS?

